PERCEPTIONS & REALITIES

PERSPECTIVES ON SUPERIOR SERVICE AND WIN-WIN RELATIONSHIPS

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Giving Thanks

Have you noticed that people sometimes seem far more ready to pounce on others for a perceived transgression than to express appreciation for a job well done? What about you? How often do you praise others or offer an appreciation? I don't mean just for major accomplishments, but also for the little, easily-overlooked things, such as a small favor, a helping hand, or a good deed. And how often are you on the receiving end?

Fortunately, some people readily express appreciation. They compliment others for doing a nice job. They offer kudos for clever ideas. They acknowledge good service. Sometimes they even bake brownies, a sweet form of acknowledgement. These people understand the uplifting impact that a kind word (or tasty gesture) can have.

COMMUNICATION

How can we create a climate in which people readily offer thanks, appreciations, and compliments? One way is to hit others over the head and shout, "Tell me I matter!" This approach, however, is unlikely to work as a long-term strategy.

Modeling in mid-air

A more promising approach is to raise awareness of the power of a kind word by modeling how to deliver one. The intriguing thing is what a positive impact an appreciation can have on both the giver and the recipient — as I came to realize on a recent flight. I'd been noticing how quick people are to complain when service falls short, and wondered how often they offer caring comments when things go well.

I decided to find out. Near the end of the flight, I approached a flight attendant and asked her how often people complimented her on her service. Her reply: "I'm a mature person and a professional. I know my job. I don't need to hear passengers compliment me to know I'm doing a good job." Translation: "Compliments? Rarely."

I told her I appreciated her service, especially the way she used humor to reassure some passengers who were worried about their connecting flights.

I then asked how many passengers ever offered this sort of feedback. "Well," she told me, "there are 139 passengers on this flight, so" (and she pretended to do some mental calculations) "that makes one out of 139." I asked, "And how was it for you to hear what I said?"

"You made my day," she said. She was beaming. She may not have needed a compliment to know she was doing a good job, but she certainly didn't mind hearing one. And though my intention had been to make *her* feel good, what surprised me was how deep-down good her reaction made *me* feel. As much as I may have done for her, she did even more for me in helping me recognize how good it feels to offer an appreciation.

Once you decide to offer caring comments whenever you can, opportunities to do so seem to appear everywhere. And each time you give, both of you receive.

MEASUREMENT

Be Careful What You Measure!

That which is measured is managed. Or is it? Measuring something is unlikely to ensure it's managed, unless the results of that measurement are analyzed, reviewed, reported — and acted on.

It probably is true, however, that that which is *not* measured is not managed — or at least is a lot less likely to be managed. If you don't track product defects, hardware downtime, customer complaints or class no-shows, you may not know if things are getting better or worse, or remaining stable. On the other hand, if you devise measures to help monitor performance, you're much more likely to pay attention to what those measurements reveal, particularly if they point to a positive or negative change over time. And having noticed evidence of change, you can ask: What does this information signify? What do we make of this situation? What action does it require of us, if any?

Asking what the change might signify is not a trivial matter. For example, if the number of calls for help with a particular product is lower this month than the previous three months, does this decrease mean customers have become proficient in its use? Or just the reverse — have they become so baffled that they've tossed the product out the nearest window? Or could it be that they tried to call, but gave up when they became trapped in your new voice-mail system?

Another example: If it's taking longer on average to resolve customers' problems, is it because you're juggling too many responsibilities, the problems are becoming more difficult, or your group is experiencing a brain drain? The range of solutions to consider may vary considerably depending on the factors contributing to the situation.

Become a measurement sleuth

Although it may be difficult to know what a change signifies, once you've detected a change, you can do something about it. Having the right information, you can ask questions. But beware, it's one thing to use measurements as management information and altogether another thing to use them as performance incentives. Using measurements as the basis for conferring rewards or imposing penalties for performance can backfire, and in ways that should be obvious before the fact, but often aren't. For example:

An insurance company decided to reward employees for the speed with which they handled claims. The result:

Claims processors began to settle claims carelessly in order to do so rapidly, and errors mushroomed.

A customer service department penalized service representatives who didn't answer calls by the third ring. The result: Overworked service reps began to answer the ringing phone and shout, "I can't help you," and cut the caller off in order to get the next call by the third ring.

A sales organization rewarded its staff when monthly sales reached a certain dollar threshold. The result: Sales efforts slowed for the remainder of the month so that subsequent sales could be deferred and applied to the next month's sales figures.

In these three examples, the results were exactly as desired: speedier claims handling, faster call answering, and monthly sales that consistently exceeded the threshold level. The real impact, however, was mishandled claims, angry customers and diminished revenues.

Measure for measure

Clearly, the very process of measuring can distort the importance of the thing measured and can lead to consequences that are just the reverse of those you are seeking. Therefore, in reviewing existing measures, or devising new ones, ask: Are we measuring the right things? Could the process of measuring have repercussions that we need to guard against? How might this measurement backfire?

And if, while taking measurements, you see a dramatic change in a short period, ask: Does this change reflect a genuine improvement or decline in performance, or is it an unintended consequence of the measurement process? If it's a genuine change, figure out what it means. And don't make assumptions: Things have a way of happening for strange and mysterious reasons, so investigate and be sure.

Is silence golden?

Whatever you do, don't become so dependent on the numbers you're tracking that you fail to see emerging problems until they become big enough to show up in your monthly reports. Remember, no calls next Thursday could mean that your services are a total success — or a miserable failure. Don't wait until you've sat through a month of silent Thursdays before asking what it means.

MANAGEMENT

Totally Outrageous Screw-Ups Permitted Here

What's a good way to encourage open and honest communication among your staff, especially regarding problems they face, mistakes they make, glitches they create, and things that just plain seem to go wrong? When I was a client support manager, I tried a light-hearted approach that worked wonderfully. You're welcome to use this technique, but be forewarned: It'll help if you're already known for being a little zany.

It was a few days before year end. I bought some peel-and-stick stickers — the kind that come in different sizes, shapes and designer colors. I selected round, aqua stickers in two sizes, medium and large. I wrote the name of each person in my department on two medium-size stickers and one large sticker.

I called my staff together and told them I wanted to acknowledge their efforts over the past year by giving them something special they could use during the coming year. I then gave them each the three stickers with their name on it.

I explained that these stickers entitled each of them to two medium-size screw-ups and one totally outrageous screw-up during the next year without fear of repercussions. In my sternest mock-serious voice, I explained, "By turning the appropriate sticker in to me at the time of the screw-up, you'll be let off the hook, provided you follow some important rules." I then advised them as follows:

1. To be let off the hook, you must turn the sticker in at the time of the screw-up, or as soon thereafter as you learn about it.

2. Two medium-size stickers are equivalent to one large sticker, entitling you, if you so choose, to two totally outrageous screw-ups rather than one outrageous screw-up and two medium-size ones.

3. Any glitch or goof that I don't know about won't count as a screw-up. However, if you withhold information about a biggie and I come to know of it anyway, you'll forfeit all your stickers, and possibly much more.

4. If a screw-up results from the combined efforts of two or more of you, you can each turn in half a sticker. Fractions less than one-half will not be accepted.

5. Since we're all extremely busy, minor screw-ups should just be fixed without any special fanfare.

6. At the end of the next year, all unused stickers will become null and void. There will be no carry-over stickers, therefore no advantage in exhibiting a year's worth of exemplary behavior in hopes of retaining stickers for use in subsequent years.

In closing, I reminded them that the sticker effective date was January 1st, and any screw-ups during the last few days of the current year were at their own risk.

They got the point: I neither expected nor required perfection. We had a role that entailed tackling difficult situations under stressful conditions and problems would occur. When they did, our approach would be to openly acknowledge them, accept responsibility, resolve them, and do our best to learn from them.

This type of Sticker Strategy doesn't work with people who take themselves too seriously. Fortunately, we didn't suffer from that affliction. We had demanding customers, constantly changing priorities, and critical deadlines, and we all agreed that creating an environment in which we could laugh at ourselves and with each other was an important key to maintaining our sanity.

I made only one mistake. I forgot to allocate stickers to myself. That proved to be a Totally Outrageous Screw-up.
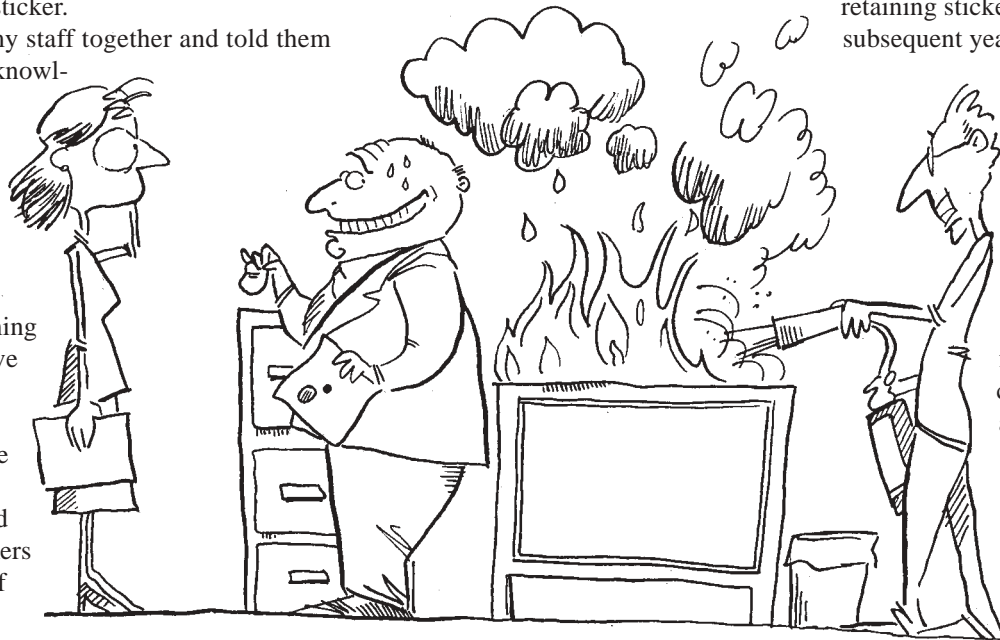
MEETINGS

A Manual for Miserable Meetings

Some groups excel at holding effective meetings. Many others don't. If you want to hold miserable meetings, the following suggestions will get you off to a good start. But if you'd prefer meetings that are productive, collaborative and energizing, here is a list of What Not To Do.

1. Hold meetings whether they're needed or not. The more often they're held and the more people invited, the better. Meetings help people stay connected. And they ensure that people don't fritter their time away doing useful work. Back-to-back meetings are especially effective in maintaining meeting momentum.

2. Start late. Wait 10 minutes, or 15 or 20. A few stragglers haven't arrived yet. Once they do, engage in chit-chat. Catch up on yesterday's game. Vacation plans. Whether it'll ever rain (or stop raining). The latest Internet jokes. Cover these unpressing matters thoroughly before settling down to business, so people don't have to cut into their off-hours to exchange this chit-chattery.

3. Don't set a time limit. Let the meeting run from now until whenever. Or maybe longer. Too much pressure isn't healthy, so why feel constrained by addressing your issues in a finite amount of time? There's nothing like that relaxed feeling of having absolutely forever to get to the point.

4. Don't distribute an agenda before the meeting. And don't open the meeting with an outline of what you'll be addressing. That way you can raise issues that nobody's prepared to discuss. If you explain what you hope to accomplish, you risk being seen as goal-oriented. Besides, if there are no loose ends from this meeting, it'll be harder to find a reason to hold the next meeting. (Though not all that hard. See #1.)

5. Arrive unprepared. Just grab a stack of stuff from your desk. Then, as you present each topic, look at your pile of paper and mumble, "I know it's in here somewhere." Pull out each piece of paper, gaze at it, pause, then say, "Mmmm, nope, this isn't it." This is an excellent technique for learning how to think on your feet.

6. Present glaringly gaudy graphics. Fill your slides with a migraine's worth of clashing colors. Use charts, graphs and tables, preferably in every slide. Dazzle everyone by using every feature available. Use tiny type so you can pack in more content. Redundancy is good, so show several slides for each of your points. And don't forget: Saying, "I know you can't see this, but. . ." is a real crowd pleaser.

7. Bellow your opinions and stifle all others. Miserable-meeting gurus never let the facts get in the way of a good opinion, so express your opinions often and loudly. That way, you can steer everyone to your way of thinking. Explain that you don't need their opinions — you have plenty of your own. If they want to have their say, they should hold their own meetings.

8. Permit interruptions and distractions. Leave your cell phone on and answer all calls. Otherwise, you'll just have to return the calls later. Extend the same courtesy to everyone else, and if they're needed elsewhere, halt the meeting and call a break. Everyone will appreciate knowing that the meeting won't interfere with the timely completion of unrelated activities.

9. Allow side conversations. These buzzings aren't superfluous. If people can get a load off their minds while they're together, they can save time later on. Besides, you wouldn't want every insult and wisecrack to be voiced out loud, would you? Everyone has two ears. Only one needs to be focused on the meeting.

10. Change the subject frequently. You've got a captive audience, so this is the time to raise all those other issues on your mind. Staying too narrowly focused makes for dull meetings. Attendees will appreciate the diversity of your subject matter. Remember those famous far-from-last words, "That reminds me of another thing . . ."